DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 741 FL 020 464

AUTHOR O'Brien, Teresa
TITLE Predictive Items in Student Writing.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 16p.; In: Written Language: British Studies in Applied Linguistics 2. Papers from the Annual Meeting of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (Reading, England, September 1986); see FL 020 460.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Applied Linguistics; Foreign Countries; *Grading; *Language Proficiency; *Language Tests; *Student Evaluation; Student Writing Models; Test Anxiety; Testing; *Writing Skills; Written Language

ABSTRACT

The question of whether students perform linguistically differently when writing under examination conditions than when writing term essays is addressed in this working paper. The study was prompted by the feeling by many students that their linguistic performance deteriorates in examination conditions and that this deterioration makes a difference in their grade. Many lecturers claim that they take no notice of how an examination answer is written and grade only on content. This paper examines whether there is in fact a relationship between linguistic performance and grading. The research attempt described centered on the types of prediction identified by Tadros. It is shown that only some of the Tadros types are used by students in the current sample and that so far they have not proved to be a reliable measure of difference. Contains 7 references. (LB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED346741

PREDICTIVE ITEMS IN STUDENT WRITING

Teresa O'Brien
University of Manchester

This is very much a working paper. It recounts an attempt to find measures to answer the question: do students perform linguistically differently when writing under examination conditions than when writing term essays. The attempt centred on the types of prediction identified by Tadros in her monograph Prediction in Text (1985) and in the thesis (1981) that underlies that monograph. The paper will show that only some of the Tadros types are used by the students in my sample and that so far they have not proved to be a reliable measure of difference. It will conclude with a suggestion for further enquiry in this area.

Many students think that their linguistic performance deteriorates in examination conditions and that this makes a difference to their grade. On the other hand, many lecturers of content subjects, including the psychology lecturers who taught the 3rd year undergraduate students in my sample, claim that they take no notice of how an examination answer is written and mark only for content. The purpose of this piece of research is, then, to discover whether there is in fact a relationship between linguistic performance and grading. For that reason the analysis of essays and examination papers is being carried out in ignorance of the students' grades, although I do know that my sample includes students who obtained Upper and Lower Seconds. This is interesting in the light of comments made in a questionnaire by newly graduated PGCE students in the Faculty of Education at Manchester. Several of those who felt that their examination performance had been linguistically poor remarked that they felt it had made the difference between an Upper and a Lower Second.

In the final stages of the research a quantitative content assessment (performed with the help of the psychology staff who taught the students) must be set beside linguistic measures. A useful guide to relevant measures has come from the PGCE students mentioned above. Students reported feeling anxiety about two particular aspects of their linguistic

FL 020 964

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John Hawkins

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

performance: style and organisation. Working on the hypothesis that examination writing is likely to be closer to students' own thought processes and possibly be rather less formal in style than their essay writing, I have isolated a number of stylistic features within the sentence that will, I hope, be useful (O'Brien 1987). The present paper records a first attempt at finding a way of measuring organisational features or performance beyond the sentence.

Because the research is very much concerned with the relationship between writing, reading and grading, I have been drawn to discourse analysts who are interested in written text as a manifestation of a dialogue between writer and reader.

Hoey's On the surface of discourse (1983) seemed to offer leads. Like Winter's work (1977, 1982) it concentrates on the 'clause relation' which Winter defines as:

> 'the cognitive process whereby we interpret the meaning of a sentence or group of sentences in the light of its adjoining sentence or group of sentences'.

The importance of the notion of interpretation here interested me. Perhaps what I should look for was evidence of considerateness on the part of the writer towards the reader, enabling a relatively trouble-free interpretation. Surely there was more time to be considerate when writing the essay and inconsiderateness could be more easily forgiven in an examination. This considerateness would manifest itself in a careful choice, albeit only partially conscious, of clause relations. Working from the notion that what is wanted is a piece of writing that is easy to read and that clear clause relations would serve that end, I began to investigate further.

Winter and Hoey both work with three categories of clause-relating signals: subordinators, sentence connectors and certain lexical items which Winter has termed Vocabulary 3 (Winter 1977). These are lexical items of connection, such as: *differ, grounds, instance*. Winter names 108 items which have both a closed-system and an open-system meaning. The closed-system meaning relates to their anticipatory power. They can anticipate the coming clause relation, they set up an expectation of a

realisation. If someone writes 'Countries differ in their approaches to language planning' we predict that the following clause will tell us how they differ.

Winter and Hoey have also worked on techniques to clarify clause relations that are not signalled; one of them is that of asking questions. For example:

> Certainly there is little doubt that generally females are better 'decoders' or 'receivers' of non-verbal cues of emotion than males. Hall (1978) carried out an extensive review of the literature, analysing results from 75 studies. These studies provide strong support for a female advantage in decoding non-verbal communication of emotion. 68% of the studies reviewed reported this effect.

There is no overt signal of relationship between the last two sentences although the sequence of one sentence after another leads us to expect some kind of relationship. But if we ask the question 'How do the studies provide strong support?' or 'What is this strong support?', we can see that there is a relationship that we could perhaps label Claim-Evidence. We could further clarify the relationship by using another of the techniques: paraphrase.

These studies provide strong support ...as 68% of them reported this effect.

The fact that we can paraphrase using 'as' supports the Claim-Evidence label. We see this relationship characterised by the questions 'How can you say that?' or 'Why do you say that?'.

As Hoey has pointed out, interacting with the text does not necessarily mean that the reader actually asks questions, although that may be the case. The idea is that on the basis of certain expectations, which may or may not exist in the mind as questions, and on the basis of what the writer has already said, a reader makes guesses about the content to come and its relationship to what has preceded.

In reality lecturers may scan-read for points and skim for general organisation and linkage but it is difficult to imagine a reading process that does not include the use of predictive skills. As one of the things I am trying to explain is the students' intuitions that they are writing less well in examinations, it seemed worthwhile to investigate whether there is any basis for their feelings in the way that they have organised their text One obvious way to help and guide a reader through a text, for example, is to use predictive items which are subsequently satisfactorily followed up.

Angele Tadros' work appeared to offer a framework. In it she describes and tightly defines six types of prediction that she discovered to be frequent in an economics textbook. She chose this as her corpus because her research was stimulated by an interest in helping her Sudanese students to read their textbooks more successfully. It is important to remember that the corpus was written by a practised, published writer for a pedagogic purpose. Tadros herself warns that the categories she outlines will not be found in every type of text.

By prediction, it should be pointed out, Tadros means a commitment at one point in the text to the occurrence of another subsequent linguistic event. This she distinguishes from anticipation, the situation in which the reader guesses what the writer will do based on a mixture of knowledge of the world, the topic, language and the conventions of the text.

The six categories are these:

1. Enumeration
2. Advance Labelling
3. Reporting
4. Recapitulation
5. Hypotheticality
6. Question

I was particularly interested in Reporting and Hypotheticality as these were singled out by Tadros as signals of detachment and, as she says in her thesis, 'Teachers and examiners, for instance, would not give credit to any student who simply reports what others say, think, believe, assert or claim, because they are interested in what the student thinks about what he is reporting. Of course, the student's opinions may coincide with those

of others but this has to be signalled'. As well as helping me identify instances of prediction, these would help me to identify detachment.

Since this was an exploratory exercise, I chose from my total sample of twenty, five essays and five examination answers by the same five students. Their special subject was social psychology. Two students wrote their term essay on the following:

A1 Examine the evidence concerning individual differences in the non-verbal encoding and decoding of emotion

and then answered this examination question:

A2 Evaluate the contention that deception can be detected reliably by means of non-verbal cues.

The other three wrote their term essay on the following:

B1 Evaluate the role played by facial expression in the experience of emotion

and answered this examination question:

B2 Discuss the problems that arise in attempting to test the 'facial feedback' hypothesis. To what extent can these problems be overcome?

The essays and examination questions deal essentially with the same content, this being an important part of the research design. The discourse acts that are required: examine, evaluate, discuss, are unfortunately not matched. This problem is not relevant for our present purpose but will be taken into account in the final analysis.

The investigation began with Enumeration. Tadros claims that there are three criteria for the predictive member of a pair of this type and each of these criteria is both a sufficient and a necessary condition for classification as Enumeration.

1. Where a structure has

   either

   (a) a plural subject followed by a verb which demands a complement followed by a colon; eg The conditions are:

   or

   (b) a free clause followed by a clause binder only; eg This is possible under conditions when:

2. Where a sentence includes a cataphoric textual place reference item such as 'the following' or 'as follows' in association with a plural noun

3. Where a sentence includes a numeral, exact or inexact, and an Enumerable (subtechnical nouns, eg 'advantages' and discourse self-reference nouns, eg 'definitions'), provided the information is presented as new to the context.

This proved to be the most productive of the categories for my data, although I should say here that I have included instances where prediction and fulfilment occur in the same sentence, separated only by a comma, whereas Tadros recognises only pairs separated by a full stop, a question mark, a dash or a colon. Table 1 shows the number of instances found in each subgroup.

A comment should be made on the nature of the texts and whether they included suitable candidates for enumeration. As all the answers involved discussion of experiments performed within various theoretical frameworks, candidates for enumeration were theories and theorists, experiments and experimenters, conditions within experiments, results, problems and criticisms. There was indeed ample scope for enumeration.

If we refer to table 1, we note that student 5 has used this device rather more than the other students. Furthermore this student is the only one to

have actually used enumeration to organise the main body of the essay, with local enumerations embedded within the global.

Table 1

S.1	Essay Exam	3 2	 1P
S.2	Essay Exam	2 0	1 bn 1 bn
S.3	Essay Exam	1 2	 1 P
S.4	Essay Exam	2 1	
S.5	Essay Exam	4 5	

At first sight it would not appear to be the case that students enumerate less in examination conditions. At least two (3 and 5) have actually enumerated more, especially if we bear in mind that the essays are about 2000 words long and the examination answers only between 500 and 700 words.

If, however, we divide the students according to the general impression that their writing makes (and here the help of other raters was enlisted) we find that the weaker students do in fact enumerate, ie organise for themselves and for a potential reader, less in their examination answers. In the first subgroup S2 is rated lower than S1 and in the second subgroup S4 is rated lower than the other two students. In addition S2 has an instance under both conditions where one could argue that enumeration is badly needed. Here is the example from the essay, the less forgivable case:

> In all experiments, subjects were asked to judge non verbal expressive stimuli such as face, body or vocal cues presented in drawings, photos, film, content standard speech - whereby the speaker recites meaningless or affectively ambiguous material, varying his expressions to suit the intended emotion; randomised spliced speech - such that the audiotape is cut and reassembled into scrambled speech; and electronically filtered speech - in which electronic filtering removes the critical band frequencies so that the voice sounds muffled and the words unintelligible.

A possible comment here is that the sentence is too long. (Indeed this student often writes overlong sentences.) Shorter sentences alone, however, would not improve the readability whereas some form of signalling, enumeration, for example, would. The same student in the examination writes this sentence:

> Thus DePaulo and Rosenthal (1979) designed an experiment in which senders were *either* asked to express *dislike* for someone they did actually dislike - that is, underlying and sent affect are both negative; *benevolence* for someone they truthfully liked - that is, underlying and sent affect are both positive; *pretend* to like someone they actually dislike (that is, underlying affect - negative, sent affect - positive) and *pretend* to dislike someone they really liked (that is, underlying affect - positive, sent affect - negative).

This example is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the signal for alternativity, *either*, is misused: there are in fact four, not two conditions and the obligatory *or* of the second member is missing. Secondly, and most importantly for our present purpose, an attempt at ellipsis fails. The sentence requires that we supply something from the preceding grammatical environment in order to understand the two instances of *pretend*. When we look back we find that for the second condition, *benevolence*, ellipsis involves replacing 'senders were asked to express'. This replacement will not work, however, with *pretend*. Here the ellipsis needed is 'senders were asked to'. Had the student used enumeration, this difficulty for the reader might have been avoided. It is interesting to compare the parallel passage from S1's examination answer:

For example, in a study by Rosenthal and DePaulo (1979) subjects were asked to:

(a) describe somebody they like truthfully (L)
(b) describe somebody they didn't like truthfully (D)
(c) describe somebody they liked as though they didn't like her (LD)
(d) describe somebody they didn't like as though they did (DL).

This example and reflection on table 1 perhaps suggest an alternative hypothesis: that we might in fact expect more enumeration in the examination since students are quite likely to learn sets of information from notes which are numbered, although, of course, they will not necessarily set them down in that form. In fact if we include 'possible' instances and bear in mind the relative brevity of the examination pieces, we see that this is true in three out of five cases. A 'possible' instance is one which does not conform strictly to the Tadros criteria but which, nevertheless, presents itself as organised and has some predictive and predicted markers. Here is the example from S1's examination answer. It is reproduced complete with signs of examination pressure.

> Rosenthal and DePaulo in the study described above report individual differences in the detection of deception. firstly no reliable sex differences were found. Generally females are superior at both encoding + decoding the non-verbal communication of emotion, but they lose this advantage the leakier a channel becomes (Rosenthal + DePaulo, 1979). The detection of deception seems to be most accurate with the leakier channels eg body, tone of voice. So this finding is consistent with other literature.
>
> They found that good liars are generally good all-round liars ie the tendancy to get away with lying in the DL condition was related to the ability to lie in the LD condition. The same is not true, however, on the detection of deception the ability to detect deception in one condition is not related to the ability to detect deception in another. The reverse of this appears to be true for leakage ie sending ability not related, but detect related.

As a lay reader, I was not quite sure how many individual differences were being reported. There is, however, a qualitative difference between this extract and those from S2 quoted above. In this case one feels that the student is in fact enumerating mentally if not graphically and that the informed tutor-reader would have little difficulty in following the text and judging the extent of the student's knowledge and understanding. The local cohesion is, in fact, very tight. Indeed we seem to have here a good example of the shared-knowledge principle in operation, a principle that one suspects has to be used rather more in the examination than in the essay.

There are, then, perhaps three indications here for further investigation: firstly, that where a student has used enumeration as an important organising principle in the essay, he or she will use it in the examination too (S5); secondly, that sets of information that could possibly have been enumerated are not so treated in the examination, due perhaps to the pressure of getting the facts down; and lastly, we have an indication that a weak writer may well fail to use this device at all in the examination.

A convenient bridge to the next category, Advance Labelling, is provided by this extract from some cyclostyled notes that are issued to students in the Psychology Department by one of the tutors:

> The structure of an essay can be indicated in an opening sentence or paragraph. A useful way of doing this is to say something like this:
>
> 'This topic, x, can be divided into the following sub-topics: A, B, C, ...N. These in turn, can be approached in the following ways: 1, 2, 3, ...n. In this essay I propose to consider sub-topic, B (or B and C, or ...) in the following way -'
>
> Reading that kind of introduction your reader knows at once whether you are attempting a deep but narrow essay, or a wide but shallow one. Within the bounds of an essay you cannot be both deep and wide, nor need you apologise for not being so.

A neat example of both enumeration and advance labelling. The latter in Tadros' words is the category of prediction in which the writer labels,

and thereby commits him or herself to perform a discourse act. She gives four criteria and this time all must be fulfilled before a sentence can qualify for classification as a predictive member.

1. The sentence must contain a labelling of an act of discourse;

2. The labelling of the act must be prospective;

3. The role of the actor is not assigned elsewhere, and therefore remains as the writer's;

4. The sentence labelling the act must not include its performance [I would like to alter this to its *complete* performance].

Here is an example from S1's essay:

> Firstly, these differences in decoding and encoding will be discussed briefly ...Some possible explanations for these differences will be considered. The relationship between decoding and encoding will then be examined and finally, some interesting differences in decoding the various non-verbal channels of communication will be discussed.

A reasonable hypothesis might be that the essay, being the result of thought, planning, revising, etc would include more predictive items of this sort. This hypothesis was not in any way confirmed by this small sample. The results of the search were very disappointing. They are presented together with the results from the Recapitulation search as these two categories are complementary. Both are types of metastatement. Recapitulation, according to Tadros, is used to refer to a member which predicts by recalling information from a previous place in the text. In her words, 'In order to prevent new information from floating, the writer often provides an anchorage for it by means of Recapitulation, and therefore Recapitulation predicts new information.' (Tadros 1985). Here is an example, again from S1's essay:

> This discussion of sex and personality differences in non-verbal communication of emotion has so far not dealt with the relationship between decoding and encoding within individuals.

We might call this negative recapitulation but it certainly predicts what the writer will deal with next.

Only one student of the five had used either of these devices.

Student 1 had two instances of advance labelling and two instances of recapitulation in the essay and one of each in the examination. I was somewhat surprised by these results. Was this typical of student writing? I turned to another section of my sample, papers from students studying Freud and Piaget as their special subject. There the picture was quite different: four of the six students used advance labelling and recapitulation in both conditions, only one did not use them at all. It is difficult to believe that this difference is an effect of topic. It may in fact be an indicator of quality and as such could be useful.

As indicated earlier, I was particularly interested in the categories which indicated detachment from the propositional content under discussion. I found, however, that the Tadros definition of reporting was too narrow for my data. Tadros had in mind such pairs as:

> For a long time many people thought that if a severe rise in unemployment occurred, a 'cost-push' inflation would peter out. The steep rise in unemployment during 1969-71 however, did little to check demands for higher wages which, in fact increased more rapidly during these years than ever before.

where the act of reporting is a prelude to demolishing or modifying the proposition reported. Other examples might lead to evaluation rather than rebuttal. In both cases the predicted sentences would follow the predictive sentence immediately.

Since I could only find one example of reporting as defined by Tadros in the ten pieces of writing I was examining, in spite of the fact that students were all the time reporting what others had said, I felt that I ought to look closer at this. What I discovered was that there were naturally enough

many reporting sentences but that there were comparatively few evaluative statements of a local nature that could be seen as detached. There were evaluative sentences, but they were reported evaluations and it was often very difficult to tell (without knowing the literature) whether these evaluative statements were the writer's or well-worn comments from the literature, or indeed the judgements taught on the course. What was interesting, however, was the discovery that the relation did exist at the global discourse level - in other words, pieces that were almost entirely reporting the experiments of others and the comments of others upon the findings of those experiments ended with an evaluative note in six out of ten cases. Bearing in mind that we have moved from the local to the global level, it is interesting to look at these results in conjunction with the discourse acts required.

Table 2

Student	Discourse Act	Evaluation
1	Essay: Examine	Some evaluative statements but no evaluative conclusion
	Exam: Evaluate	No evaluation, answer unfinished
2	Essay: Examine	No evaluation
	Exam: Evaluate	Small evaluative conclusion
3	Essay: Evaluate	Evaluative conclusion
	Exam: Discuss	Evaluative conclusion
4	Essay: Evaluate	Small evaluative conclusion
	Exam: Discuss	No evaluation
5	Essay: Evaluate	Evaluative conclusion
	Exam: Discuss	Evaluative conclusion

When students were explicitly asked to evaluate, whether this was in the essay or in the examination, they did so four times out of five (and we are unable to judge the fifth case properly because it is unfinished). With reference to the second subgroup where two of the three students produced evaluative conclusions in both conditions, it might be worth considering whether the recognition of the need for an evaluative conclusion is a feature of better quality writing.

As far as clausal relations were concerned, however, it seemed that the report-evaluation/rebuttal relation, while obviously salient enough in Tadros' data, a work with pedagogical intent, written by someone confident enough to come into the discourse as 'primary knower' as Tadros, quoting Berry, says, was just not common enough in this particular section of my data to take account of.

Hypotheticality also proved not to be relevant to my data and there were too few instances of Question to be worth report. In both cases it may transpire that these categories are of use when looking at the writing from the other special subject areas (there are four altogether). In the meantime it seemed necessary, in view of the limitations of the Tadros model with respect to my data, to pursue another line of investigation. This involves testing out the predictive power of a text by revealing it to a reader a sentence at a time, allowing the reader to look back over already revealed text but not forward. This is a technique reported by Bush (1983). She found that there seemed to be a link between successful anticipation of subsequent text by the reader, and readability. Space does not permit a report of my preliminary findings but I hope that this will be the topic of another paper.

Bibliography

BUSH L. The anticipatory potential of text patterning in the expository essay. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Birmingham, (1983)

HOEY M. On the surface of discourse. London: Allen & Unwin (1983)

O'BRIEN TA. Writing for continuous assessment or examinations - a comparison of style. In Selmous 1985 Conference Proceedings, ELT Documents, Pergamon (1987 forthcoming)

TADROS A. Linguistic prediction in economics text. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, (1981)

TADROS A. Prediction in text. English Language Research Monograph, University of Birmingham (1985)

WINTER E. A clause relational approach to English texts: a study of some predictive lexical items in written discourse. Instructional Science, 1977, vol 6, 1, pp 1-92

WINTER E. Towards a contextual grammar of English. London: Allen & Unwin (1982)